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Special Analysis

EL SALVADOR: Near-Term Military Prospects

The Daily today prints the key judgments of the Special National Intelligence Estimate "Near-Term Military Prospects for El Salvador."

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We believe the tactical stalemate between the Salvadoran armed forces and the insurgents of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) probably will continue, at least through mid-1984. If outside support to both sides continues at current levels, neither is likely to gain a decisive advantage in the near term.

With US support, the armed forces have expanded to a total strength of some 37,500, including defense and public security forces. The FMLN has now reached an effective combat strength of between 9,000 and 11,000 armed insurgents by upgrading its militia forces through training, experience, and the acquisition of weapons. These strength figures do not represent an increase in the total number of guerrillas but do reflect an important shift of those formerly regarded as "part-time" guerrillas to "full-time" fighters. The Salvadoran military now has a manpower force ratio of only about 4 to 1 over the guerrillas.

The guerrillas' combat effectiveness is judged to be high because of their sound war-fighting doctrine, excellent training, good communications and intelligence, and an ability to incorporate lessons learned from the fighting into their tactical and strategic thinking. The insurgents appear to do better at controlling the terms and pace of military engagements, use effective tactics, and are now capable of defeating isolated government units of up to the size of a "hunter" battalion. Their thorough use of intelligence is a major factor behind their survival and success on the battlefield.

Nevertheless, they lack widespread popular support, in part because of the popularity of agrarian reform and other government political and economic initiatives. Moreover, the guerrillas have not yet taken a major city and cannot tie down or defeat government strategic units. Logistic problems and factionalism also undercut insurgent effectiveness.

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The FMLN has been following a strategy of military and economic attrition designed to cause the collapse of the armed forces and the government. The guerrillas probably view the national election scheduled for March as a major test of their forces, and we expect a campaign of increased urban attacks and terrorism. In addition, there are indications the guerrillas may attempt to seize and declare a liberated zone in northern or eastern El Salvador. []

Cuba and probably Nicaragua are likely to provide adequate supplies for an election offensive. The US force presence in the region, Salvadoran and Honduran interdiction efforts, and anti-Sandinista activity in Nicaragua have slowed, but not stopped, outside support to the FMLN. Logistic support, particularly from Nicaragua, may diminish in response to US pressure, but it probably will be adequate to sustain the guerrillas at least for a reduced level of operations. FMLN headquarters may move to El Salvador from Nicaragua, particularly if the guerrillas declare a liberated zone. It probably would be able to function within El Salvador at least through late 1984. []

The insurgents will not be able to achieve victory without increased popular support, but, if they should get adequate logistic support, they are likely to pose a greater threat to US military and political objectives in El Salvador, especially the March election. The military will have to act aggressively to prevent the insurgents from seizing the initiative at the time of the election. If the guerrillas were to be successful in undermining the March election, their near-term prospects would significantly improve. Over the next year, the FMLN will be in a stronger position to exploit discontent if extreme right terrorism continues and efforts to roll back the reform process succeed. []

US training and support have allowed the armed forces to grow and improve and have been a major factor in the military's present ability to prevent an insurgent victory. Four quick-reaction battalions and several special operations units have been organized, trained, and effectively used against the insurgents. The number of available junior officers has been increased significantly, and improvements have been made in the armed forces' technical skills. The armed forces can continue to expand, but the government's ability and resolve to mobilize fully against the insurgency will be seriously constrained by the military's shortcomings and by resistance from the country's military and economic elites. []

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The armed forces' mobility and logistic support, though increased, have not kept pace with operational and force requirements, and more ground and air transport is needed. More training for departmental and security forces is also needed, and communications assets and command and control concepts are still antiquated. Uncertainty concerning the adequacy and level of US assistance also has inhibited the armed forces' conduct of the war.

The quality of the officer corps is relatively high, but attitudinal problems within the corps will have to be overcome if the guerrillas are to be defeated. Resistance to change—both tactical and political—has impaired the ability of the officer corps to pursue the war effort optimally.

Most of the officer corps, while not opposed to reforms, distrusts the Christian Democratic Party and is susceptible to rightist political machinations that undercut its leadership and divert attention from military operations. Recent sweeping changes have placed most major commands under competent leaders and should ensure the near-term unity of the armed forces. However, these changes also have strengthened the hand of rightist officers and will inevitably impact on national politics before and after the election in March.

Despite such problems, there is little likelihood of an armed forces collapse in the near term. The officer corps is determined to defeat the guerrillas, and the enlisted ranks will fight well when properly supplied and led.

In the near term, the military is more likely to be successful if it moves to preempt rather than to react to guerrilla strategy. Reversing recent insurgent gains will be the military's most immediate challenge. The armed forces' ability to achieve needed tactical objectives will depend on continued US aid and the continued commitment of the officer corps to the war effort. If the officers become preoccupied with partisan political maneuvers, the guerrillas might be able to score a major military and psychological victory at election time.

The armed forces will be susceptible to US influence, but performance on human rights issues will continue to be mixed. The military prefers to adapt—rather than to adopt—US tactics, and it will be deeply stung by any public US criticism of its war effort.

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Current levels of US assistance are adequate to enable the Salvadoran military to prevent an insurgent victory in the near term. However, the armed forces will require increased and sustained aid to overcome the present stalemate and eventually to defeat the guerrillas. Given the 4-to-1 military-to-guerrilla ratio—which is well below what historically has been required to defeat an insurgency—the Salvadoran armed forces' manpower and firepower will not be able to expand rapidly enough to gain a decisive advantage in the near term. However, US assistance that enhanced the military's mobility and communications would increase the tactical prospects of the existing forces until these forces could be expanded over the longer term.

Nevertheless, US military assistance alone will not solve all the armed forces' problems. Without improvements in Salvadoran military capabilities, some resolution of attitudinal problems in the officer corps, preservation of economic and political reforms, and neutralization of extreme right influences, the country's prospects for winning the war will be poor over the long term.

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